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Cuts in programs to help inmates questioned

Marisa Lagos, Chronicle Sacramento Bureau

Tuesday, February 16, 2010



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Brant Ward / The Chronicle

Inmates take an adult education class at San Quentin, where 13 programs will be eliminated.

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about 850 prison workers who currently run substance abuse and anger management programs, help inmates get high school diplomas and teach offenders marketable skills such as plumbing, horticulture and graphic arts.

About 57,000 of the state's 170,000 prisoners take advantage of the education programs each year, and 12,000 enroll in substance abuse classes. The cuts mean that 17,000 fewer inmates will be able to enroll in academic and vocational programs and 3,500 fewer inmates will be able to enroll in substance abuse programs. At San Quentin State Prison alone, 13 of the 19 programs currently offered are slated for elimination, according to teachers there, including all but two of the six vocational programs, an anger management course and a high school program.

California has a 70 percent recidivism rate - the highest in the nation. That number will increase with these changes, said San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris, a Democratic candidate for attorney general.

"We know that when you go to prison and come out with no changed circumstances, you are prime to reoffend," she said. "The first and principal priority should be prevention."

The cutbacks are the result of the state's budget crisis and the \$60 billion deficit lawmakers tackled last year. As part of two budget plans approved in 2009, prison officials were forced to reduce spending by \$1.2 billion this year. The state also made deep cuts to education, health and human services, and many other public programs.

(02-16) 04:00 PST
Sacramento - --

An effort to slash prison costs in California by laying off hundreds of workers who run rehabilitation programs could backfire, resulting in higher recidivism rates and ultimately higher prison costs, critics say.

Over the next several months, prison officials will shave \$250 million from rehabilitation spending in prisons and dismiss

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Still, California now faces a new \$20 billion deficit through June 2011 and further cuts to state programs are anticipated.

Thus far, much of the attention and controversy over the prison spending cuts have centered on provisions to let some inmates out early and allow others to be removed from parole supervision - moves that law enforcement officials have roundly criticized and some are challenging in court.

But Assemblyman Ted Lieu, D-Torrance (Los Angeles County), another candidate for attorney general, said it is also troubling that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who added "Rehabilitation" to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's name five years ago, is now overseeing huge reductions of those programs.

Department officials portray the cuts as unfortunate but said the agency is ultimately making the prison system's programs more effective. Among those efficiencies highlighted by the department's secretary of adult programs, Elizabeth Siggins: cutting the amount of time prisoners will spend in classrooms, targeting opportunities to inmates' needs, focusing on vocational programs that are proven to work and can be completed in less than 12 months, using offenders as tutors or counselors, and relying more on volunteers and teaching assistants.

New rules governing how inmates earn credit for time served will also encourage them to participate in programs, she said, though she acknowledged that fewer inmates will be able to participate.

"There's no doubt the cuts are significant, ... but we have been determined to implement the reductions in a manner that is consistent with what we know about what's effective in reducing recidivism," she said. "We want to mitigate the impacts the cuts will have."

But the people who teach those programs - many of them for decades - said the reductions will leave many inmates without access to programs. Any savings to taxpayers, they argued, will be void because of increased prison violence and recidivism.

John Kern, a landscape horticulture instructor at Soledad State Prison since 1984, said prisoners who learn a trade are less likely to commit crimes once they're released, that prisons are safer when inmates are busy and that much of the work done in vocational programs - including landscaping, printing and janitorial services at prisons - actually save the state money.

His program, for example, provides Soledad Prison plants for landscaping, and has also given thousands of seedlings to state parks for ecological restoration projects.

"These programs give inmates hope, and inmates with hope are more easily managed," Kern said. "We don't change every guy, but we change enough to make it worth it."

In New York state, where the recidivism rate is closer to 30 percent, Department of Correctional Services Commissioner Brian Fischer has made a concerted effort to partner with colleges and universities and seek federal grants. Last year, about half of the state's inmates took part in academic programs and nearly as many were enrolled in vocational classes, said agency spokesman Erik Kriss. Siggins said California's prison agency is working to build partnerships.

Assemblyman Lieu said prison officials are wrong when they claim the new policies will reduce recidivism and crime.

"I believe the best way to reduce prison costs is to inject money into rehabilitation programs. ... If it works for a certain percentage of people, that's really all we need," said

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Lieu, who believes the policy changes will make it easier for inmates to get credit for time served.

Corrections Secretary Matthew Cate "calls these landmark achievements that will reduce crime," Lieu continued. "It's false."

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hepstein 2/16/2010 6:10:40 AM

A 70 percent recidivism rate is a major clue that the program isn't working. The state should defund all programs that don't work.

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CA already has a high recidivism rate, with those programs. We spend more to incarcerate one criminal annually than for a K-12 education for a child. Our prison population has grown 645% over the past decade, even as our state's population has remained stagnant.

During the budget debacle, our legislators kept in tact the spending on prisons, yet slashed another \$9 billion from education. This will ensure more of our children will be unprepared for jobs, illiterate, un-skilled, and thus dependent on welfare or crime to survive. We're penny wise but pound foolish.

Mandatory sentencing laws need to be reviewed, so non-violent criminals (using drugs, etc.) get help and treatment rather than a jail cell. Also, those who are un-documented aliens should be sent to federal prisons, since they belong in federal custody, so our state should not be saddled with those costs.

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Mass prison building and endless foreign wars---are we a nation of morons? As someone who has watched this moronic behavior since Viet Nam let me give you a hint---legalize drugs, prostitution and gambling. Quit spending trillions sending US forces all over the world. Maybe you could drive down a road without falling in a pothole.

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